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AUTHOR Cassara, Beverly B.
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ABSTRACT

The World Assembly addressed the theme of women, literacy, and development from the perspectives of international leaders, countries, and the host country. Critical issues related to education, social and political status, and the environment, poverty, and population were treated in plenary sessions; afternoon workshops were held on such topics as the following: production of literacy materials, adult education and literacy research, preparations for the World Summit on Social Development and Fourth World Conference on Women, education for human rights, women's rights and democracy in the Arab region, literacy and empowerment, women and violence, literacy and the media, gender planning in literacy and adult education, and international cooperation. The six-point final declaration of the assembly related to these issues: recognition of diversity within literacy; obstacles women and girls face in access to education; need for a unified, comprehensive strategy for education for all; special youth programs; need for updated, action-oriented research; and advocacy for literacy. Highlights of the secretary-general's report of International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) activities included establishment of priority concerns, publications, acting as a major consultant to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, and outreach efforts. (YLB)

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A REPORT
ON
THE FIFTH WORLD ASSEMBLY OF
THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ADULT EDUCATION

"Women, Literacy, and Development: Challenges for the 21st Century"

September 15-23, 1994 Cairo, Egypt

by

Beverly B. Cassara

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As you can imagine, it is not easy to make a summary report of such an experience--two weeks of stimulating interaction and developing relationships with adult educators from many countries in many languages--while learning about literacy needs of women all over the world for the progress of development. At the same time, in the ICAE Executive Committee and in the General Assembly we were involved night and day in the effort of creating an effective future for ICAE itself. One could say the 98 degree heat of Cairo was equalled at times by the heat of the politics in our meetings, but all very democratic, of course.

So, first a few paragraphs about Cairo and the setting of our meetings and accommodations, then an overview of the conference itself, and lastly an update on the ICAE.

Cairo is a throbbing metropolis with 16 million people situated right in the middle of the desert. It takes a certain amount of stamina to do justice to the sight-seeing possibilities. For instance the famous Museum of Antiquities is not air-conditioned, but heat or no heat, one has to spend some hours there trying to grasp the fact that some of the displays date back four or five thousand years. Of course, to see the Pyramids and the tombs and temples takes one right into the

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desert sunshine, which was up to 106 degrees when we were in Luxor.

Thanks to the generosity of the Egyptian government, we were comfortably housed in a military guest house where we had to learn to slow down and accept the Egyptian life-style. However, it needs to be recorded and underlined that the Egyptian people were very fine hosts, always with a ready smile, a fine sense of humor, and a desire to be of help. Also thanks to the government, we had the use of the beautiful new conference center where the UN Population Conference had just concluded. Air-conditioned and with translation facilities for four or five languages, it couldn't have been more convenient. Also the government provided lavish entertainment for the conference participants, including a sound and light production at the Giza Pyramids, a dinner on a cruise ship on the Nile, and a ballet in the magnificent opera house among other events. Solidarity trips provided participants the opportunity to travel in several directions. My husband and I chose to go to Suez on the Suez Canal where the little city still shows the effects of the bombing from Israeli/Egyptian battles of the not too distant past, plus a visit to a cotton factory, a cruise from a shipyard, and a visit to an adult education center provided us an unforgettable experience.

Now about the conference. It was at the urging of the Egyptian government and the First Lady, Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, our keynote speaker herself, that the work of this World Assembly should be to enhance literacy for women in the general scheme of development. It was pointed out, for instance, that one-fifth of

twice the rate of male illiteracy--a problem shared by many developing countries.

In pointing to the urgency of this problem for Egypt, Mrs. Mubarak strongly suggested that no country can obtain optimal development when women who are "half the society and are responsible for the other half" are "deprived of the light of education." She added that "attempts to marginalize [woman's] role and underestimate its effectiveness are spontaneously reflected on the growth of the society and the extent of its progress." Stressing the point that governments alone cannot hope to eradicate illiteracy, she praised the International Council for Adult Education and all other non-governmental organizations for their work and begged them to continue assiduously and not to tire in their efforts.

The World Assembly addressed the theme of "Women, Literacy and Development" from the points of view of international leaders, of national perspectives, to those of the host country, on the basic critical issues related to education, social and political status, and the environment, poverty, and population. A sentence from the most recent ICAE News summarizes the problems women face. "There is a strong connection between women's illiteracy and social, economic, religious and cultural factors prevalent in a society. Poverty and marginalization; the traditional and cultural biases against daughters; the influence of conservative fundamentalist thought; the sexual exploitation of girls and women; the low priority given to women's economic contribution and girls' education are all examples of factors that influence the education and development of women."

These subjects were treated in plenary sessions in the mornings and, in the afternoons, workshops were held on such special topics as, the Production of Literacy Materials, Adult Education and Literacy Research, Preparations for the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), Preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), Education for Human Rights, Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab Region, Literacy and Empowerment, Women and Violence, Literacy and the Media, Gender Planning in Literacy and Adult Education, and International Cooperation, and more.

What will be the result of all these deliberations? Certainly, all who attended the conference were already devoted to the cause of literacy for women. Nevertheless, the sharing of ideas and problems and possible solutions must energize us all to continue and redouble our efforts in this cause, and if anyone came believing that literacy is just a simple skill, easily learned and applied, they were disabused of this idea in no uncertain terms.

In the six-point Final Declaration of the Assembly, I quote the following statement: "While the very concept of literacy has evolved over the last two decades and new demands have been placed on literacy as a social competence, it is also accepted today that there is no single definition of literacy, nor is there one single model, strategy or methodology that would fit all contexts and needs. The recognition of social, ethical and cultural diversity leads to the recognition of diversity also within the field of literacy. Improving the effectiveness of

literacy actions requires a thorough revision of conventional pedagogical and methodological conceptions and practice and a renewed effort in the training of cadres at all levels."

The other five points relate to (1) the obstacles girls and women face in getting access to educational opportunities, (2) the need for a unified and comprehensive strategy for education for all, both children and adults, (3) "young boys and girls need special programmes designed for them, not only given their specific learning needs, but also the magnitude of the social, economic and educational problems youth face today" to prepare them for adulthood (4) "the need for updating, action-oriented research facilitating cross-fertilization of experiences within and among countries and regions, as well as between the developing and the developed world...[supported] by new partnerships both within the adult education sphere and with other fields and sectors."

A final point in the Declaration needs very special attention from all of us. I quote it in full. "We acknowledge the need to advocate for the cause of adult and particularly women's literacy, specially in times when adult education is being questioned and further marginalized within the context of structural adjustment and other social and educational priorities fixed by governments and international agencies. This advocacy thrust needs to be founded on accurate information and strong arguments in favor of adult education, acknowledging both weaknesses and strengths of past experience and lessons learned."

I emphasize this point as we witness the continuing marginalization of adult education in North America. This brings

me to the last subject on my agenda, which is the current status of the ICAE and its manifold projects. But speaking of North America, I am most happy to report that while there have been six regional organizations under the ICAE, the very last to get organized, the seventh, is the North American Region. Jacques Proulx and I, as the North American members of the Executive Committee of the ICAE have lent our support to this project and were very hopeful that this could be accomplished on our watch, and so it has been. We salute the many United States and Canadian organizations which have banded together to form a very dynamic association, called the North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education. The energy and down-to-earth commitment of the members of this group is glorious to behold and I sincerely hope the AAACE and CAEO will avail themselves of the wonderful learning and energizing opportunity of signing on with them. The wave of the future in non-governmental organizations is cooperation and working together, nowhere is this more needful than right here in North America where we see adult education programs fading away.

There is no way I can summarize for you the 68-page report of ICAE activities prepared by the Secretary-General, Ana Maria Quiroz. However, I will try to hit some highlights. First I must mention the new changes in the ICAE personnel. As it happens, the terms of nine or so members of the Executive Council ended with the meeting in Cairo, which number includes myself and Jacques Proulx. All the Canadian and US national members of the ICAE had an opportunity to nominate and then elect the persons to

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replace us. They are Michael James from California and Madelaine Blais from Montreal. Like them, most of the new members from the other regions are younger persons and ready and capable of taking ICAE into the new day. A woman from India, Lalita Ramdas, was elected President of the ICAE, and a new Secretary-General will be appointed by the Executive Committee. In a time when demands on our little organization seem equal in volume to that of the UN and at a time when funding is harder and harder to come by, they have their work cut out for them. I have great confidence that they will serve well.

Perhaps I should explain the four events of our meetings in Cairo a bit more clearly. The first two days were the Executive Committee meetings. The next full week was the World Assembly as described above, including the the solidarity trips, and the meetings of the General Assembly doing the work of the ICAE including elections etc., and then during the last day or two the new Executive Committee met to organize for the future according to the actions taken at the General Assembly.

Finally, I would like to address the very comprehensive report of the Secretary-General of last year's activities of the ICAE. In preparing this report, I took the time to carefully peruse the entire 68 pages. There is so much valuable information there, I can only recommend that persons interested in the work of the ICAE in any detail, should write for a copy.

As suggested above, the ICAE has the world divided into seven regions, each with a regional secretary who attends the Executive Meeting without vote. However, each region elects a vice president. There are 106 national members throughout the

world. The national members in each region together elect one ordinary member to the Executive Committee. There are also something less than 100 cooperating non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations. The headquarters in Toronto has the challenge of tying together in networks all the various interests represented by these world wide members. Before the last World Assembly in Thailand, the Program Advisory Committee recommended that the ICAE establish some priority concerns since it was becoming impossible to meet the many interests. The priority concerns established were: (1) the education of women, (2) education for peace and human rights, (3) environmental education, (4) and literacy, and the major resources of the ICAE went to support these. Additionally, it was believed that it would be efficacious to spread the headquarters for each of these programs to various regions. Thus The Women's program was situated in Dakar, Senegal with Soukeyna Ndiaye Ba as Director; the Peace and Human Rights program in Finland with Tapani Ojasti as Director; the International Literacy Support Service in St. Lucia with Didacus Jules as Director; but it was necessary temporarily to set up the Environmental program in Toronto under the direction of Peter Basal. There is some question now as to whether this decentralization has been completely successful and this will be a matter to be considered by the new Executive Committee.

Additionally there are a number of networks which at least receive moral support and some services from Toronto. These include Peacefund Canada, Education and Criminal Justice, Special

Learning Needs of Adults, History of Adult Education, Education and Older Adults, Transformative Research , and Participatory Training and Participatory Research.

ICAE publishes an excellent journal, Convergence and the ICAE Newsletter.

However, the above only begins to define the work of the ICAE. The Secretariat has to organize the World Assembly every four years, and the Executive Committee and other committee meetings in between.

For an example of other activities, the ICAE along with 41 other NGO's has the honor of being a major consultant to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, along with its many commissions and subsidiary bodies, such as the Commission for Social Development, the Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Regional Economic Commissions. In this capacity the ICAE sends representatives to many, many meetings, suggests items for agendas, makes statements and submits draft resolutions in support of adult education concerns.

In other UN related work the ICAE works with all the major international conferences on Environment, Women, Population, and next year in addition to the Women's Conference in Beijing, the ICAE has a working group advancing the needs for adult education in the Social Development World Summit in Copenhagen.

The regions of the ICAE are sponsoring more regional conferences now as they become well developed. The other outreach efforts of the ICAE are too numerous to try to detail here.

The Secretariat gets at least 50 requests a week for information or assistance, and continues to develop the resource center which is no small job in itself. It is necessary to have a number of languages represented by the personnel at the Secretariat for all the many functions of the Council.

I think I must give over describing the work of the council at this point. In 1993 the Council passed its twentieth year of existence. The world has changed a great deal in that time. Now the new Executive Committee must take the responsibility of keeping the ICAE abreast of these changes and functioning in a way to best meet new challenges. This may mean changes in the Constitution, changes in location of services, changes in roles of personnel, and changes in priorities and services. Much will depend on their success in finding funding. We all depend on them to keep the ICAE strong in the support of adult education.

What remains to be said is that this can only happen if the members--our national members and our regional organization support it to the hilt. We are all here today because we believe that today's adults need to learn how better to serve the best purposes of humankind. Today's children need that better education too, but they can only get it from enlightened adults. At any rate, we cannot wait for a new generation to cure our social, political and economic woes. Adult education cannot solve these problems alone, but there can be no good and permanent solutions without much more adult education than the world today provides.